

Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

3 October 1984

COLOMBIA: STATUS OF NARCOTICS CRACKDOWN

Summary

Evidence linking narcotics traffickers to the assassination of Justice Minister Lara last spring jolted President Belisario Betancur into taking serious measures to combat Colombia's thriving illicit narcotics industry. Betancur declared a state of siege, authorized greater involvement by the armed forces in the anti-narcotics campaign, and approved the use of military courts to try accused traffickers. Reversing his earlier stance, the President also agreed to implement the bilateral extradition treaty with the United States and sanctioned a pilot marijuana spray eradication program--using glyphosate herbicide--in northern Colombia. The unprecedented crackdown temporarily paralyzed drug networks and forced traffickers to change some of their methods and operational locations. [REDACTED]

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This memorandum was prepared by [REDACTED] South America Division, Office of African and Latin American Analysis, and [REDACTED] International Security Issues Division, Office of Global Issues. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. This analysis is based on information available as of 12 September 1984. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the South America Division, ALA [REDACTED]

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Presidential decisions over the next few months on the term of the state of siege, adoption of full-scale spraying programs, enactment of judicial reforms, and establishment of spending priorities will determine whether the campaign will yield any permanent progress. We judge that wavering government and public support for the campaign, coupled with such problems as limited economic resources and corruption in law enforcement agencies and the judiciary, probably will dilute the administration's efforts in the months ahead. Betancur's determination not to let the anti-narcotics campaign jeopardize ceasefire agreements with the guerrillas may also weaken his resolve. Even if the government demonstrates unexpected determination, however, it will face a protracted uphill struggle against firmly entrenched narcotics organizations. We expect that the spillover effect of the Colombian crackdown will lead to increasing requests from other regional governments for US assistance in combating the traffickers.

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Intensifying The Anti-Narcotics Campaign

New Government Policies

All available evidence indicates that drug traffickers were behind the murder of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara on 30 April. The assassination outraged Colombians and prompted President Betancur to declare a state of siege that provides for the military arrest and trial of suspected drug traffickers. In addition, the President issued decrees that double prison terms for drug-related offenses and permit military judges to impound property and levy fines. The government is studying ways to make permanent the most effective of these state-of-siege provisions. In addition, Enrique Parejo, Lara's successor as Minister of Justice, has announced ambitious plans to improve the judiciary system and attack corruption in government.

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Lara's murder also prompted the government to move forward on two issues of interest to the United States that had been stalled by Betancur's fear of popular opposition: the extradition of Colombians indicted on drug charges and a test herbicidal spraying program against marijuana.

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The Betancur administration has decided to allow the extradition of Colombians to the United States to face drug charges but is still dissatisfied with certain provisions of the bilateral extradition treaty and concerned about nationalistic opposition. US Embassy sources report that since 1 May, Colombia has arrested 14 persons wanted in the United States and has requested that US officials provide the necessary paperwork to extradite them. [redacted]

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Despite unease about possible political and ecological challenges, the government decided on 22 May to permit spraying of marijuana fields with any herbicide except paraquat. In late June, Colombia began a test spraying program using glyphosate against immature marijuana plants in northern Colombia, and by mid-September 1,700 hectares had been sprayed, according to the US Embassy. [redacted]

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Expanding Military Involvement

Under the state of siege, the military has been thrust into the forefront of the government's anti-narcotics campaign--especially in the realm of drug interdiction and the arrest and prosecution of drug traffickers. The military has moved forcefully by setting up roadblocks, conducting door-to-door searches, and raiding suspected cocaine laboratory sites and marijuana stash points. Moreover, to speed up action by military courts, the armed forces created a special office to deal with narcotics prosecutions, [redacted]

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The US Embassy reports Colombian military leaders are especially disturbed by the ties between traffickers and guerrilla organizations. [redacted]

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[redacted] the military was ordered to locate and destroy large cocaine laboratories and uncover additional links between traffickers and guerrillas. According to press reports, the military discovered 24 members of a smaller insurgent group, the Army of National Liberation (ELN), with 150 tons of marijuana in the Guajira region on 13 May. [redacted]

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[redacted] the military has information linking narcotics networks to larger groups--M-19 guerrillas in Caqueta department and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas in Caqueta, Meta, and Vaupás departments--as well as to Army of National Liberation

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insurgents in Arauca. [REDACTED]

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Military leaders also have launched investigations to determine the extent of traffickers' inroads into the armed forces. [REDACTED] links between traffickers and Army officers have been uncovered in several departments. Military personnel associated with drug dealers have been dismissed, but the military prefers to keep its investigations quiet, according to the US Defense Attache.

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[REDACTED] the Air Force recently discharged twelve military personnel for narcotics related activities at a remote base near the Ecuadorean border, according to the US Defense Attache. [REDACTED]

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The military's deep involvement in the anti-narcotics campaign may have strained the Armed Forces' military justice system and diverted resources from its counter-insurgency efforts. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] the large number of prisoners charged with narcotics violations had caused a backlog in military courts. [REDACTED] senior military officials regret that the anti-narcotics effort distracts officers from combat duty and exposes them to bribery and corruption. [REDACTED]

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Seeking International Help

The government has sought US and other foreign assistance in its anti-narcotics campaign. In late May, then Foreign Minister Lloreda requested \$24 million in US aid to help strengthen law enforcement and develop a crop substitution program. The US Embassy reported that in discussions that month with a visiting US official, Betancur requested assistance to speed up extradition requests and improve the Colombian helicopter fleet. Colombia has also asked the United States for assistance in tracing ownership of the gun used in Lara's murder, in taking stronger action to cancel the registration of aircraft used in drug trafficking, in lifting the pilot licenses of traffickers, and in imposing US export controls on chemicals used in cocaine processing. [REDACTED]

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Colombia has also made progress in obtaining regional

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[redacted]

cooperation of drug issues by encouraging its neighbors to focus on the spillover effects of the drug problem. These efforts led to the signing on 11 August of the "Quito Declaration Against Drug Trafficking" by the presidents of Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela; the president-elect of Panama; the president of the Peruvian Senate; and a member of the Nicaraguan junta. The nine-point declaration stressed the need for a multinational fund to help developing nations combat narcotics. [redacted]

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Besides financial assistance, Colombia has apparently persuaded its neighbors to at least acknowledge the need for tighter enforcement against drug traffickers:

- The US Defense Attache in Bogota reported that since May Venezuelan representatives have met regularly with Colombian enforcement officials to discuss drugs, contraband, and terrorism issues. Venezuela adopted a tough new anti-drug law in July and, according to press accounts, dismantled a cocaine processing lab near Caracas.
- [redacted] in late May, the Ecuadorean military conducted sweeps near the Colombian border to interdict Colombian drug traffickers.
- Colombian officials also met with counterparts from Brazil and Peru in May to discuss a proposal for an international agency similar to INTERPOL to combat regional drug trafficking.
- Panamanian President-elect Nicolas Barletta promised greater assistance in tracking drug financial flows. In addition, the government is cracking down on Panama's own involvement: the executive secretary of Panama's Defense Forces General Staff has been fired for receiving payoffs from Colombian traffickers, according to the US Embassy.

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US Defense Attache and Embassy sources report these countries have agreed to intensify border inspections, establish special commissions on drugs and exchange information on traffickers. [redacted]

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The Impact Of The Crackdown
Impressive Initial Results

The immediate effect of the Colombian crackdown was dramatic. The US Embassy reported that seizures of drug materials and arrests of traffickers increased markedly during the first month and a half after Lara's death. Marijuana confiscation rose from 55 tons in April to 380 tons by mid-June. For the same period, the amount of cocaine seized increased from 56 kilograms to over four tons and arrests climbed from 109 to 1,425. [REDACTED]

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The crackdown was especially effective in the marijuana growing areas of the north coast. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] traffic practically ceased in May in Atlantico, Bolivar, and Magdalena departments. In Leticia, an important narcotics center, an economic recession resulted as those associated with the drug trade were thrown out of work, driven underground, or forced to flee the country. Narcotics activity was also disrupted in the cocaine capital of Medellin. [REDACTED]

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Throughout the country, low level traffickers bore the brunt of the crackdown. The major traffickers, with their greater resources, advance warning, and political connections, were better equipped to ride out the storm. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] many sought refuge in remote regions of the country, while others continued in business but were generally forced to postpone shipments or raise prices to compensate for greater risk. Several sources have reported that a number of major traffickers fled the country and moved their operations to Ecuador, Peru, Panama, Brazil, and Bolivia. Among the major drug kingpins, Pablo Escobar now moves back and forth between Panama and his home department of Antioquia, and Carlos Lehder is in hiding in the isolated department of Amazonas. [REDACTED]

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Trafficker Countermeasures

There is mounting evidence, however, that the effect of the crackdown is waning as traffickers adopt new techniques for getting around enforcement efforts. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] trafficking in the north coast marijuana regions is resuming, although at a

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lower level and under greater secrecy. [redacted]

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[redacted] traffickers are switching from small planes, which shuttle between clandestine airfields, to larger aircraft--such as the DC-6--which can fly under Colombian radar directly to sites in the United States. Prominent north coast traffickers recently have been spotted back in their home areas, and traffickers are also slowly returning to Medellin. [redacted]

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Traffickers have also adjusted somewhat to attempts to disrupt their financial arrangements. US efforts to track money-laundering flows in US, Panamanian, and Bahamian banks have caused many traffickers to shift from cash to checks, [redacted]

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[redacted] Traffickers increasingly use European banks--especially those in Luxembourg and Switzerland--to deposit their money. They also are establishing front companies in European countries where government regulations are less stringent, [redacted]

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Trafficker Overtures to the Government

In response to the crackdown, narcotics kingpins have intensified their efforts to reach a modus vivendi with the government. Public revelation of these overtures, however, produced a strong political backlash, which is likely to prevent the government from cutting a deal for the near term. [redacted]

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In May, several prominent traffickers--who claimed to control 70 to 80 percent of narcotics revenues and \$2 billion a year in business--met in Panama with Attorney General Jimenez. They gave him a letter for President Betancur in which they offered to dismantle their narcotics empires and return to Colombia in exchange for government promises not to prosecute them or extradite them to the United States. Once the letter and the Panama meeting became public knowledge, respected Colombians--including former president and Conservative Party leader Misael Pastrana, New Liberal Party spokesman Luis Galan, Defense Minister Matamoros, and members of the Bishops Conference--strongly condemned Jimenez for having met with the traffickers and opposed any deal with them. Stung by the public response, Betancur was forced to reject the traffickers' offer to negotiate. [redacted]

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[REDACTED]

We believe Betancur may regard a modus vivendi with the drug underworld as another feature of his personal campaign to bring domestic peace to Colombia. The President, therefore, may seek to return to such an approach, if he is persuaded that it is politically feasible. In doing so he could count on the support of prominent Colombians such as former president Alfonso Lopez Michelsen, who has publicly defended his own participation in the Panama meeting; Catholic Bishop Castrillon, who also endorsed negotiations with the traffickers; and leftist Nobel laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

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In addition to seeking an agreement with the government, the traffickers are relying on their usual tactics of intimidation, bribery, and selective assassination to hinder the implementation of the government's anti-narcotics crackdown. The US Embassy reports that traffickers have threatened to reveal evidence--including cancelled campaign contribution checks--that they allege would link Betancur and other prominent politicians to traffickers. Most recently the escort car of Attorney General Jimenez was attacked by three armed men on the day he was scheduled to appear before the Colombian Congress to testify about his contacts with the traffickers.

[REDACTED]

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Prospects

In our view, the government's anti-narcotics effort will begin to backslide within a few months. The key factors that affect Colombia's commitment to the anti-narcotics effort probably will weaken. These include:

- The determination of Colombia's political leaders.
- The ability of judicial institutions and law enforcement entities to resist the pressures of traffickers.
- The extent and endurance of public support for the campaign.
- The continuing participation of the military in enforcement.
- The availability of economic resources.

-- The cooperation of Colombia's neighbors in the effort.

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Although Lara's assassination shocked leaders of both major parties by dramatizing the seriousness of the narcotics problem, questions remain concerning the commitment of some politicians to a long-haul campaign. Some congressmen, for example, are heavily indebted to drug interests because of past campaign contributions; according to the US Embassy they might take the lead in pushing for a less energetic effort against the traffickers. In addition, several ministers have expressed publicly strong reservations about the herbicide spraying program.

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The commitment of President Betancur to the anti-narcotics program is tempered, in our view, by his desire to ensure that it will not upset the ceasefire agreements with domestic insurgent groups. The truce with the guerrillas has bolstered his sagging popularity at home and enhanced his international stature as a man of peace. The government is already playing down possible cease-fire violations, and Betancur would not want military efforts against the traffickers to spark confrontations with the guerrillas.

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Without dramatic steps to strengthen the legal system, the anti-drug campaign would begin to lose much of its force. Indeed, Colombia's weak law enforcement agencies and judiciary, which have long been susceptible to the traffickers' economic and political power, will remain major impediments to maintaining the anti-narcotics program.

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Sustaining public support for the campaign may also be a problem. The new Minister of Justice has complained that news coverage of the campaign has decreased substantially, and the spray program in northern Colombia has drawn negative press treatment. In addition, traffickers will continue to try to stir nationalistic sentiment by promoting the charge that government policies are dictated by the United States.

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The willingness of the military vigorously to pursue the anti-narcotics effort is essential, but the armed forces' deepening involvement in enforcement is causing serious misgivings among senior officers. We believe, however, that these reservations are probably offset by the recognition among most members of the high command that the military's

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withdrawal, especially from the prosecution effort, would undermine the anti-narcotics campaign. [REDACTED]

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The government's economic resources for conducting the anti-narcotics effort probably will continue to be severely limited. Colombia is experiencing a foreign exchange crisis and may be forced to reschedule its foreign debt by the end of 1984. In addition, the anti-narcotics program will have to compete for scarce funding with the economic and social reforms that the government has promised to carry out as part of its guerrilla pacification effort. [REDACTED]

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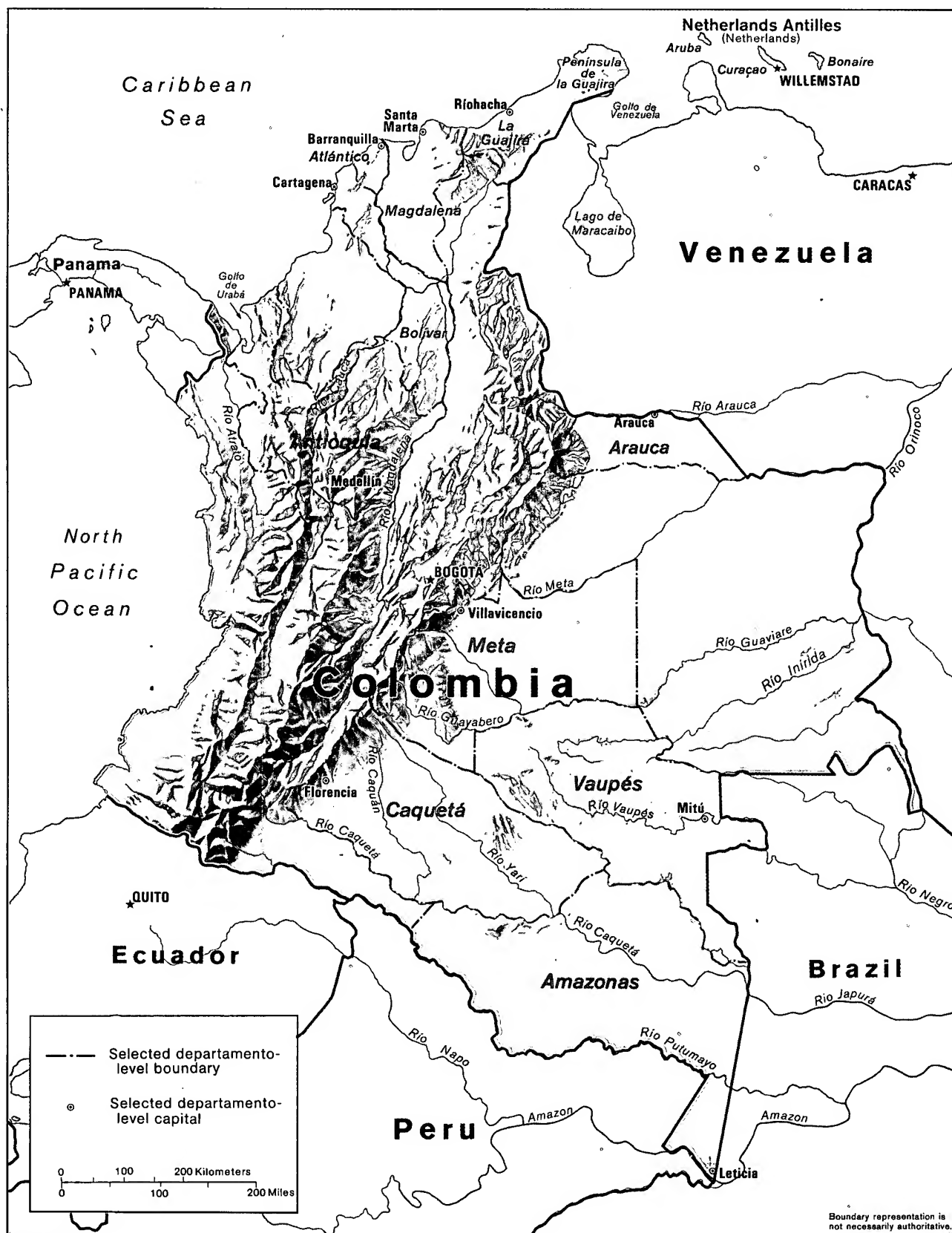
A comprehensive and effective anti-narcotics campaign will require increased involvement by other governments in the region. Some countries, such as Ecuador and Panama, are even less able than Colombia to mount a serious program. Colombian leaders have indicated to US officials that their efforts will fail unless financial flows of traffickers are pinched off in countries like Panama, with its flourishing offshore banking industry. Efforts at tracing money laundering patterns both inside and outside of Colombia will continue to be costly and difficult. So far, neighbors' responses appear to be more words than actions; and actions that have occurred, while helpful, have been neither especially strong or sustained. [REDACTED]

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Even assuming that the Colombian Government demonstrates the requisite political will to combat the problem, the proliferation of drug processing and trafficking activities will require the United States to spend more money in order to help foster a regional anti-narcotics campaign. Progress in crippling some Colombian networks has apparently resulted in the survival of the fittest among traffickers and caused them to take greater pains to protect their operations, but it has not yet had a noticeable impact on the supply of illegal drugs to the United States. This suggests that a sustained, high-level effort will be necessary to compensate for adjustments by the traffickers and to bring about a reduction in the flow of drugs. [REDACTED]

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